

## Tri-partite Friendship in Plato's *Lysis*

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A cursory reading of Plato's *Lysis* suggests that the dialogue fails to discover the nature of friendship. In this essay I shall argue, however, that a three-part model of friendship emerges from combining the most promising elements of the various accounts of friendship. The substantive portions of the accounts can then be related to the earlier part of the dialogue (the initial discussion between Socrates and Lysis) to strengthen the model. Furthermore, the dramatic elements of the dialogue corroborate the model because the actions of the interlocutors mirror the model that I propose.

### The Framework for the Model

The first step in understanding friendship involves laying out the fundamental framework of the model of friendship. Of course, the first components of friendship are the individuals to whom the appropriate characteristics are attributed. These individuals are important in the model of friendship because they possess the necessary criteria and seek the goal of friendship. However, the proposed model will concentrate on the characteristics of the friends and the activity of friendship rather than on any specific friend.

The various accounts of friendship considered in the dialogue establish certain criteria. These criteria serve as useful tools to determine the framework for the model. Two such criteria are discussed at 218d when Socrates asks, "Is he who would be a friend a friend to someone, or is he not?" Menexenus answers, "Necessarily," and this answer leads to the question of friendship's motivation:

Soc.: Now is it for the sake of nothing, and because of nothing, or else for the sake of something, and because of something?

Men.: For the sake of something and because of something.  
(218d)

The interlocutors never abandon this notion that friendship is for the sake of something and because of something. That which friendship is for the sake of is what the friend pursues—the goal of friendship. This pursuit is initiated by some impetus or "because of something."



Therefore, the first two important constituents of the model are that which friendship pursues (friendship's goal) and that which acts as the impetus for this pursuit.

### The Goal of Friendship

Although the interlocutors explicitly agree that friendship needs a goal, the dialogue does not provide a definition of this goal. Nevertheless, assertions made by the interlocutors throughout their inquiry serve as clues to this question. For example, the interlocutors agree that friendship will "arrive at some beginning principle" (218d–219d). They come to this conclusion by examining the friendship that takes place between an unhealthy person and a physician. This person befriends the physician in order to regain a state of health. In turn, health can lead to some greater good. Socrates makes this progression clear:

It [is] necessary, then, for us . . . to arrive at some beginning principle, which will no longer bring us back to another friend, . . . for the sake of which we say that the other things are also all friends. (219c–d)

This ultimate principle of friendship is the first part of the model and will be referred to as (A).

No candidate is ever proposed for the ultimate principle of friendship during the exchange between Socrates, Lysis, and Menexenus. However, they describe this ultimate principle as something in which all friendships will terminate and something that cannot be superseded by any further good. This description leads to the conclusion that this first principle must be the greatest good. In the earlier conversation between Socrates and Lysis, Socrates discusses happiness, goodness, and wisdom—all of which could conceivably be (A). Further investigation of the exchange, however, will reveal that although happiness and goodness are integrally bound up with friendship, part (A) of the model consists of wisdom alone.

What evidence is there that wisdom is the ultimate principle of friendship? In the aforementioned conversation with Lysis, Socrates questions Lysis about happiness (207d). This query leads Lysis to confess that his parents grant him little control over his life. It therefore appears they do not wish him to be happy. However, Socrates shows that Lysis will be happy only if he practices good judgment; he must therefore be wise about a matter before he benefits from controlling it.



For example, although his parents preclude him from driving the chariot and the mules, they depend on him to read and write. In regard to reading and writing, Lysis is wise and therefore useful. Socrates' statement to Lysis, "Then if you become wise, my boy, all will be your friends and all akin to you—for you will be useful and good," illustrates how wisdom will be the foundation of all pursuits, the ultimate principle of friendship (210d). Wisdom leads to usefulness and goodness and thus leads to happiness. Since happiness and goodness depend on wisdom, the only possible end principle is wisdom.

Examining the relationship between wisdom and certain "goods" offers additional proof that wisdom must be (A). In order for certain goods to be beneficial, they must be governed by wisdom. Socrates explains how wisdom alone results in profit and freedom:

With regard to the things in which we become prudent,<sup>1</sup> everyone . . . will entrust them to us; we will do in regard to these matters whatever we wish, and no one will voluntarily obstruct us. Rather, we ourselves shall be free in regard to them and rulers over others, and these things will be ours, for we shall profit from them. But with regards to those things in which we don't acquire good sense, no one will entrust us with permission to do what is in our opinion best concerning them; but everyone will obstruct us. . . . And we ourselves shall be subject to others in regard to those things, and they will be alien [property] to us, for we shall derive no profit from them. (210b–c; brackets in original)

This passage shows that without the accompaniment of wisdom, even ostensible goods are neither beneficial nor profitable. For example, it might seem that health is a good thing in itself. However, health must be used properly to be beneficial. If someone uses a strong body to bully those with weaker bodies, this behavior would be harmful rather than good. The possession of health in this case would serve no good end.

The *Meno* gives further evidence that wisdom must govern knowledge and goods. As the interlocutors in the *Meno* discuss the relationship of wisdom and virtue, they conclude:

Soc.: For all spiritual qualities in and by themselves are neither advantageous nor harmful, but become advantageous or harmful

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1. I am interpreting *prudent* here to mean wise in handling practical matters.



by the presence with them of wisdom or folly . . . then virtue, to be something advantageous, must be a sort of wisdom. (88d)<sup>2</sup>

All of these examples illustrate that wisdom is the goal in the model of friendship.

### The Impetus for Friendship

The remaining two elements of the friendship model are found in the individuals called friends. These elements allow them to pursue wisdom and thus participate in the activity of friendship. The interlocutors agree that friendship needs not only a goal, but also an impetus. Consideration of what acts as the impetus for the pursuit of (A) leads to the conclusion that this impetus must be some sort of lack.<sup>3</sup> The idea of some sort of lack is introduced as the interlocutors examine the possibility of a friendship between two likes. They choose to investigate the example of two individuals who are both completely good. They conclude that two such individuals will never be friends. Socrates explains why those who are completely good will never seek one another in friendship:

How, then, in our view will those who are good be at all friends to the good since neither do they long for each other when absent—for even apart they are sufficient for themselves—nor do they have any use for each other when present? (215b)

Though this passage usefully points to lack as a necessary element of friendship, it needs clarification. At this point in the dialogue, the interlocutors are examining the possibilities of who can befriend whom. This passage works in the dialogue to eliminate the possibility of two likes being friends, as it shows that two who are likes in that they are good could never benefit from one another. Although friendship in this specific example is impossible, the interlocutors have failed to reason well; they made too much of a leap in concluding that likes can never be friends. As the friendship model becomes clearer, it will become evident that two who are alike in a certain sense will in fact be friends.

2. This passage refers only to spiritual qualities, but in the same part of the *Meno*, Socrates argues that the same is true of external and bodily goods. In order for them to be advantageous, they must be guided by wisdom.

3. The interlocutors discuss this impetus as a type of evil. Throughout their discussion, however, this evil emerges as some sort of a lack. I will therefore



In order for such individuals to become friends, however, the deficiency that causes friendship must be present. This deficiency then becomes the impetus or motivation to pursue wisdom. The interlocutors never clearly characterize this deficiency. The previous example of the sick person befriending the physician for the sake of health<sup>4</sup> and on account of the sickness shows how the deficiency (in this case the lack of health) leads to the participation in friendship. Perhaps the interlocutors failed to produce a more specific notion of this lack due to their inability to articulate wisdom as the ultimate goal of friendship. If the ultimate end of friendship is wisdom, then its initial impetus is ignorance.

However, ignorance alone does not allow a person to participate in friendship. Although the friend cannot be totally good, some sense of the good is necessary in order to recognize a lack and enter into friendship to remedy it. This sense of the good demonstrates that the friend is good to some extent, though not completely. Socrates illustrates why this sense of the good is imperative:<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that this<sup>6</sup> is before it itself becomes bad as a result of the evil which it has. For once it had become bad, it would no longer have any desire for, or be a friend of, the good. For we said that it was impossible for bad to be a friend to the good. (217c).

In this passage, when Socrates discusses "the evil which it has," he does not refer specifically to a lack of wisdom. As mentioned earlier, the interlocutors never concluded that this evil was ignorance. Yet I feel that once again this vagueness is due to the absence of a specific goal, namely wisdom. Although the characters never understand wisdom to be "the good," I take "the good" in this passage to mean wisdom. Socrates shows that one can be a friend while possessing this lack if the lack has not yet poisoned the soul. The individual must maintain some sense of the good in order to be a viable candidate for friendship.

It is difficult to imagine this friend who will possess both a lack of wisdom and a sense of the good. Socrates, however, discusses such individuals:

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4. Health is, of course, only an intermediate good that is ultimately for the sake of wisdom.

5. In this passage, Socrates discusses the possible friend in regard to the friend possessing some lack.

6. Socrates is referring here to the individual's participation in friendship.



We wouldn't say that anyone bad and stupid loves wisdom. There are left, then, those who while having this evil, ignorance, are not yet senseless or stupid as a result of it, but still regard themselves as not knowing whatever they don't know. And so therefore, the ones who are not yet either good nor bad love wisdom; but as many as are bad do not love wisdom, and neither do those who are good. (218b)

From this we are able to see how a person who is neither completely good nor bad can pursue wisdom through friendship.<sup>7</sup>

### A Fully Established Model

Now the model can be fully sketched out. It has already been established that this three-part model includes wisdom (A). The model also includes individuals, referred to as (B) and (C), who are neither completely good nor bad but possess some ignorance along with some sense of the good. The first individual (B) pursues wisdom because of some ignorance. In order to achieve wisdom, (B) seeks out (C) who, possessing a sense of the good, is capable of helping (B) pursue wisdom. The second individual (C) does not only act as an assistant to (B), but is also a (B) who pursues wisdom because of some ignorance. The first individual plays the role of (C) as the second individual adopts the role of (B). Thus these friends can vacillate between roles at any time during the pursuit of wisdom, giving and receiving assistance simultaneously. Upon attaining wisdom, (B) and (C) learn the proper uses of other goods and thus become happy because they are useful and good.

The relationship that is less clear in the dialogue is the one between (B) and (C). Studying the different accounts of friendship leads to the conclusion that in order for (B) and (C) to be successful in their endeavor, they must in some way be akin to one another. Socrates explains that "if you are friends to each other, [you] are by nature in some way akin to each other" (221e). Socrates explains that someone

would never desire, nor love passionately, nor love [as a friend] unless he happened to be akin in some way to passionately beloved—either in his soul, or else in some character of his soul, or some of its ways, or some aspect of it. (222a; brackets in original)

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7. Further support for the assertion that the friend will be neither good nor bad can be found at 217a, 217b, and 218b.



Therefore, it must be some likeness in the soul that draws (B) and (C) to one another. It is feasible that friends must be alike in moral character; they must both be ruled by the rational, the spirited, or the desirous parts of the soul. Because a true friend must desire wisdom, the only possible friends are those who are ruled by the rational parts of their souls. Only rational individuals recognize what they do not know and work to remedy that lack. The activity of philosophy is the perfect illustration of two "lovers of wisdom" working to quell their ignorance. This model of friendship is one example of philosophy—the active pursuit of wisdom by rationally ruled individuals who have enough sense to recognize their deficiency.

### The Interlocutors as Potential Friends

The actions and descriptions of the dialogue's interlocutors show how they fit the model. All three of the interlocutors admit to some ignorance—one of the criteria for friendship. As Menexenus returns to meet with Socrates and Lysis, Socrates points out Lysis' ignorance as he explains, "This one here doesn't understand something about what I've been saying, but he says that he supposes Menexenus knows" (211d). Although this quote describes a feigned ignorance, it still establishes the model with Lysis having some ignorance, which drives him to seek Menexenus to remedy it.

Socrates' admission of ignorance not only establishes his lack but also reaffirms that wisdom creates happiness.

When I see . . . you and Lysis, I am struck by it and I congratulate you on your happiness in that, young as you are, you [two] are able to acquire this possession quickly and easily, and that you have quickly and thoroughly acquired such a friend in him, and he, again in you. But I am so far from this possession that I don't even know the manner in which one becomes a friend of another, but these are the very things I wish to ask you, since you are experienced. (212a; brackets in original)

Socrates not only fulfills the criteria of a lack, but he also claims a desire for wisdom, the attainment of which results in happiness. He asks Lysis and Menexenus for help, thinking that because they are experienced, they are capable of assisting him. Not long into the discussion, Menexenus also admits to being without the proper knowledge (213c). At this point, all three interlocutors are shown to possess the ignorance necessary in friends.



In the friendship model, a sense of the good is just as important as ignorance. Very early in the dialogue, Socrates describes Lysis as "someone worth being spoken of not only for being beautiful, but because he was beautiful and good" (207a). This description points to Lysis as being somehow good. His embodiment of both ignorance and goodness indicates that he is neither good nor bad. Though nothing explicitly reveals Socrates' goodness, his being approached by Hippothales indicates that he is thought of as possessing some wisdom. Based on this and numerous examples in other dialogues, we can conclude that Socrates does have a sense of the good.

### A Deviation from the Model

No such assumption can be made about Menexenus. There is a blatant absence of any text pointing to his goodness of character. Furthermore, Socrates and Lysis discuss Menexenus' "contentious" nature and Lysis explains to Socrates that he would like Socrates to "chasten" Menexenus for his hubris (211b-c). Plato, in providing a negative depiction of Menexenus, implicitly suggests his lack of goodness. Thus we have found the first deviation from the model. In spite of this deviation, the three do make progress in their inquiry as is indicated in the following example:

Soc.: And at the same time as he said this he blushed. I had the opinion that what had been spoken escaped him involuntarily, because of his applying his mind intensely to what was being said—an attitude which was evident also while he was listening. And so, since I wished to give Menexenus a rest and was also pleased by that one's love of wisdom, I turned to Lysis and began to make my arguments to him. (213d-e)

This passage illuminates Lysis' character. It shows the obvious interest Lysis has in gaining wisdom. As he is "applying his mind intensely," we get the picture of a youth hungry to learn more. This is certainly characteristic of someone who is ruled by the rational part of the soul.

Unfortunately, the interlocutors never gain that which they are pursuing—an adequate definition of friendship. The interlocutors' arrival at a state of *aporia* forces us to re-examine their activity. Close investigation reveals ways in which they fail to adhere to the model. This failure stems from the different natures of the interlocutors and not from their actions. Thus it makes sense that they should be unsuccessful in achieving wisdom.



Socrates declares his frustration when, after examining several possible notions of friendship, the three are unable to discern what it means to be a friend. Socrates explains that "if nothing among these is a friend, I no longer know what to say" (222e). He then says, "I already had in mind to set in motion someone else among the older fellows" (223a). This decision to end the conversation with Lysis and Menexenus implies that Socrates sees little chance of discovering the true nature of friendship through discussion with them. Socrates' final words indicate both his sense of failure and an unwillingness to label the three as friends:

Now, Lysis and Menexenus, we have become ridiculous—I, an old man, and you. For these fellows will say, as they go away, that we suppose we're one another's friends—for I put myself among you—but what he who is a friend is we have not yet been able to discover. (223b)

This quotation shows that Socrates remains puzzled about the object of the inquiry. He cannot definitely call the boys friends without proper knowledge of what a friend is. This failure is compatible with my model as well because my model shows that those who are unable to assist one another in the pursuit of wisdom fail to meet the friendship model and cannot be characterized as friends.

Why do the interlocutors fail and where do they stray from the model? For one thing, the necessary kinship, which I pointed out as being moral character, is never confirmed. Although Socrates and Lysis can be said to possess senses of the good, the same cannot be said of Menexenus. This points to Menexenus' failure to fit the criteria for a friend and the incompatibility of the interlocutors as friends. The friends must be akin to one another in regards to their souls and without this, no success can be reached.

Originally, Socrates has the notion that Lysis and Menexenus are friends and will thus help him in his pursuit of knowledge about friendship. But because Menexenus lacks goodness, he cannot be friends with Lysis. Since the two are not truly friends, they lack the experience that could have helped him. Had Socrates known that the two would not be useful in achieving the definition of friendship, he might have picked other subjects to pursue.

### Conclusion

Although the interlocutors never reach the goal of defining friendship, all of the elements of their characters and actions nonetheless



mirror the model I have proposed. Despite the deviation, a working model emerges that helps to establish the requirements of friendship. My model also shows how the *Lysis* is successful in its attempt to find a definition of friendship. The definition that emerges is important to Plato as it makes participation in friendship equal to doing philosophy. By depicting the friend as the wisdom-loving philosopher, the *Lysis* has far-reaching implications for Platonic philosophy and for the nature of the dialectic. In view of this model, the so-called friendships in the other dialogues may be reinterpreted and redefined. Furthermore, Plato scholars may approach the *Symposium* as a work in which Plato further develops the notion of a three-part friendship that has philosophy as its goal. Thus Plato has provided a foundational work in the *Lysis*.



### Works Cited

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